



Afghanistan: understanding humanitarian networks

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ALNAP Case study

Glossary

ACBAR	Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief
ANCB	Afghan NGOs Coordination Bureau
ANSO	Afghan NGOs Safety Office
ADRRN	Asian Disaster Risk Reduction Network
AWN	Afghan Women's Network
SWABAC	Southern and Western Afghanistan and Balochistan Association for Coordination
NDMC	National Disaster Management Committee
PDMC	Provincial Disaster Management Committee
NSP	National Solidarity Programme
ANDS	Afghan National Development Strategy
CDC	Community Development Council
ANDMA	Afghan National Disaster Management Authority
NDMC	National Disaster Management Commission
ODP	Office of Disaster Preparedness
GIRoA	Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
MAIL	Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock
MRRD	Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoPH	Ministry of Public Health
MoEc	Ministry of Economy
MoRR	Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation
MoLSAMD	Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyred and Disabled

ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
UNAMA	UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
HCT	Humanitarian Country Team
HRT	Humanitarian Regional Team
HDG	Humanitarian Donor Group
AHF	Afghan Humanitarian Forum
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation
WFP	World Food Programme
UNHCR	UN High Commission for Refugees
HAP	Common Appeals Process
CHAP	Common Humanitarian Action Plan
ECHO	European Commission Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection department
FSAC	Food Security and Agriculture Cluster
HAP	Humanitarian Accountability Partnership
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
RRD	Relief, Recovery and Development
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
CoAR	Coordination of Afghan Relief
STARS	Skills Training and Rehabilitation Society
CHA	Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

SDO	Sanyee Development Corporation
ACSFo	Afghan Civil Society Forum
AWEC	Afghan Women's Educational Centre
ICVA	International Council of Voluntary Agencies
NFA	Network Functions Approach

Background and Introduction

This case study is part of a wider ALNAP/ADRRN research project investigating networks of humanitarian actors in a number of Asian countries. The objective of the research is to improve the knowledge base around networks in the humanitarian system, and to deepen understandings of their form, function and capability in delivering improvements in emergency response and preparedness.

In addition, the project aims to increase understanding of the networking activities carried out by national NGOs working on disaster and crisis response.

An important motivation for this work is to understand the current nature of networking at a national level, to capture instances of success, and to attempt to formulate propositions about how these successes might be replicated elsewhere. The particular research questions the project addresses are as follows:

1. In what ways are organisations currently engaged in networking at a national level?
2. What form do these networks take and what functions are networks perceived as fulfilling – what functions should they be fulfilling?
3. How does the involvement of national and international organisations in national level networks and coordination mechanisms differ?
4. How do networks on disaster and crisis response relate to networks on other relevant issues, such as DRR and development agendas?
5. How are national networks linked to other networks at regional and international levels?
6. What leads to the emergence of networked forms of action?
7. What are the key challenges and opportunities for national level humanitarian networks?

Full details of the research project and its approach can be found on the ALNAP website.

This case study begins by outlining the humanitarian context in Afghanistan, including the particular hazards and vulnerabilities faced, and current humanitarian policy debates in the country. It then describes the state and non-governmental response structures present in the country, and the range of partnerships and collaborations that have arisen between actors working on humanitarian and disaster response issues.

The next section explores in more detail the most relevant inter-organisational networks present in the country, outlining their aims and goals, specific network forms, then describing the functions

these networks are seen as performing, and the range of challenges that they face. The networks included in this section are:

- The Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR)
- The Afghan NGOs Coordination Bureau (ANCB)
- The Afghan Civil Society Forum (ACSFo)
- The Afghan Women's Network (AWN)
- The Coordination of Afghan Relief Network (CoAR)

The case study concludes with some initial findings that will inform and be expanded upon in the synthesis report.

Methodology: This research is based on a series of interviews conducted in Herat and Kabul and via telephone between November 22nd and December 3rd 2012. In total, 16 representatives of national networks, local and national NGOs, UN agencies and national government agencies were interviewed. A series of open questions formed the basis of all interviews, but researchers allowed respondents to expand on areas of particular interest to them or their organisations.

Challenges: Some respondents were concerned that their criticism would be attributable. This is an understandable concern in the context of a highly politically-charged donor environment for humanitarian actors in Afghanistan. Researchers assured all participants that their views would not be attributable, and that networks and organisations were not being 'assessed' for competency, and the results would not be relayed to funding bodies to be used in appraising the capacity of any individual organisation.

Everyday challenges to working in conflict-affected countries also applied, and face-to-face meetings outside of capital cities or major provincial centres were difficult to arrange due to the security risks involved. Because of this, all interviews were conducted in either provincial or district centres, or took place over remote communication via the internet. Other potential interviewees were unavailable in the anticipated locations because of previous travel arrangements or severe weather occurrences. Where network member representatives could be contacted in areas of the country outside Kabul, every effort was made to speak to them via telephone.

Humanitarian Context

Afghanistan faces numerous humanitarian challenges, both immediately and in the longer term. These encompass all major disaster scenarios, from drought and flooding to conflict and

displacement. In many areas these difficulties overlap to create complex emergency scenarios with attendant challenges in the provision of emergency relief.

Afghanistan's recent history is one of conflict and occupation, from the Soviet invasion of 1979, conducted to shore up the favoured faction of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), through the years of civil war and Taliban control, to the US invasion and continuing occupation by international forces following the terrorist attacks of 11th September 2001. Not originally designed to operate in a nation-building role, the mission of the international military coalition has transformed over time, and currently encompasses governance, reconstruction and development activities, in addition to primary security responsibilities.

A significant number of international forces remain in the country. The total number of international troops under the control of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) currently stands at just over 102,000 from 50 countries, with the United States contributing the majority of 68,000¹. This is down from a maximum of over 130,000 at the height of the troop 'surge' troops during 2010-11, all of whom are scheduled to leave over the next two years.

In addition to the likely increase in humanitarian need, many NGOs, both national and international, are unclear as to the ramifications for their work of the withdrawal of international military forces and the transition to Afghan control of security and governance functions by the end of 2014.

Transition will undoubtedly affect many aspects of the Afghan environment, from security to funding, but it is impossible to predict how far reaching the implications will be. NGOs in Afghanistan are therefore concentrating on planning for a range of scenarios in which their ability to anticipate risks and respond to events may be curtailed.

A growing number of organisations have become operational in Afghanistan in the last 10 years, attempting to address the hazards faced by the population, as well as underlying needs. These groups are diverse: international NGOs specialising in humanitarian relief and development activities; UN agencies; national and supra-national governmental departments (e.g. the Humanitarian Aid department of the European Commission, or ECHO); Afghan government ministries; and local, indigenous NGOs and groups from wider civil society. Although often linked by their common humanitarian goals and values, these organisations have an array of differing mandates and specific objectives, distinguished by location, activity focus and target group. National NGOs in particular form a crucial part of the support mechanism for ground-level activities, playing a vital role in service delivery, direct implementation of risk-reduction projects, and disaster response.

¹ NATO website, <http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/epub/pdf/placemat.pdf>

Coordination between NGOs has been addressed through several structures founded on principles of collaboration and mutual assistance, and which exhibit some of the features associated with networks. These networks can be categorised as: those formed by the UN system; those related to the national-level National Solidarity Program (NSP); and those constituted by NGOs. There is an obvious overlap between many of these actors, and some of the networks investigated displayed collaborative arrangements, with individual organisations often members of several different networks, benefitting in different ways from each.

In addition to national structures, international networks are seen as important for a number of organisations, and significant nationally autonomous activity was reported for some networks whose foundations and management lay outside Afghanistan. Beyond the conflict in the country, Afghanistan has historically suffered from a range of natural disasters and other events necessitating humanitarian relief efforts. These include drought, flooding, earthquakes and disease, which in different locations and at different times can interact to cause major humanitarian crises, exacerbating the already low levels of human development. While natural hazards have persisted throughout Afghanistan's history, the almost perpetual conflict since 1979 has multiplied the volume and visibility of catastrophic events leading to injury and loss of life. Ongoing conflict and insecurity define the humanitarian context in Afghanistan, creating needs and impacting the provision of assistance. Indicators of humanitarian need in Afghanistan have steadily deteriorated in recent years, due largely to the protracted conflict and exacerbated by recurrent natural disasters. At the same time, Afghanistan's population has doubled since 1979 – as a consequence of high birth rates and an estimated 5.7 million returnees, mostly from Iran and Pakistan – putting severe strain on resources and service delivery.² Almost 10% of the country's current 30.4 million residents are now at risk from natural disasters.³ Low-level conflict has intensified over the last two years, causing further civilian casualties and extensive displacement, delaying humanitarian action and disrupting essential services. The withdrawal of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) from Afghanistan, planned to be completed in 2014, risks disrupting local economies reliant on international spending, and hampering humanitarian and development efforts.

There are currently approximately 450,000 conflict-induced Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) within Afghanistan, including 80% who have been displaced since 2009⁴, primarily from the Southern, Eastern and Western regions where conflict and insecurity has increased. Areas in the North and Central regions have also seen an increase in IDPs, albeit from a previously low level, as a

² Population data from CIA Factbook: Afghanistan webpage, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html>

³ Global Humanitarian Assistance, Afghanistan Country Profile webpage, <http://www.globalhumanitarianassistance.org/countryprofile/afghanistan>

⁴ UNHCR IDP Report 2012, <http://afg.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/default/files/UNHCR%20IDP%20Report%202012.pdf>

preventative measure against anticipated insecurity. An additional 30,000 people have been displaced by natural disasters.⁵

According to both international and national humanitarian relief organisations, Afghanistan has made little progress in terms of preparedness or reducing the risks associated with disasters, and traditional coping mechanisms are often exhausted following consecutive emergencies. Of the last eleven years, eight have been affected by drought; all of which have required emergency relief in large areas of the country.

Hazards and Vulnerabilities

Apart from the current conflict, Afghanistan is vulnerable to a range of natural hazards. Extreme temperatures and snow in winter mean an increased risk of avalanches and can lead to extensive road closures, preventing many relief efforts getting through to isolated communities. From April to June, snow melt overwhelms rivers, leading to flooding of fertile land and settlements located in river valleys, and additional rain increases the risk of mudslides in mountainous areas. The Hindu Kush has also been the epicentre of several earthquakes in the past three decades, causing loss of life through landslides and collapsing structures.

In addition to the hazards prevalent across large areas of the country, more localised problems such as disease (of livestock, crops and humans) and locusts mean that emergency relief, in the form of both food and non-food items (NFI) is a pressing need almost year-round. A range of other emergency relief efforts, in the form of vaccinations, treatment of malnutrition, provision of temporary teaching spaces and responses to violence against children, were also provided to alleviate the suffering caused by all these conditions.⁶

The conflict across the country and persistent environmental hazards render the majority of Afghanistan's population acutely vulnerable. While communities have developed their own coping mechanisms and assistance does exist, the cycle of human suffering continues unabated. As a result of the ongoing hazards, key humanitarian indicators have steadily deteriorated in Afghanistan in recent years. A third of the population are classed as food insecure, 10% of children die before they reach primary school age, maternal mortality remains stubbornly high, and Afghanistan consistently ranks among the lowest countries in development and humanitarian lists⁷.

While environmental problems are exacerbated by the continuing insecurity in many parts of the country, conflict compounds already fragile situations and can limit access to the most vulnerable

⁵ UN Afghanistan Consolidated Appeal Process (CAP) 2012, <http://www.unocha.org/cap/appeals/consolidated-appeal-afghanistan-2012>

⁶ Afghanistan Common Humanitarian Action Plan, https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/CAP/2013_Afghanistan_CHAP.pdf

⁷ UN Common Humanitarian Action Plan 2013 Afghanistan, <http://www.unocha.org/cap/common-humanitarian-action-plan-afghanistan-2013>

populations for almost all international NGOs and many of their local partners. Risks include direct attacks on personnel and aid convoys, roadside bombs, and security checkpoints by opposition armed groups. It is therefore extremely difficult to isolate the effects of natural disasters in discussing the humanitarian context of the country, and any such exploration must include the negative effects of conflict, insecurity, and general lack of government control.

These problems continually impact on humanitarian relief efforts, and have played a major role in allowing the primary response to disasters in Afghanistan to be viewed from the perspective of immediate humanitarian relief rather than longer-term recovery and risk reduction.

The failure to more closely link the work of humanitarian and development actors in Afghanistan has caused the challenges associated with persistent environmental hazards to remain. Limited precipitation during winter and spring in 2011 caused a slow-onset drought which affected the food security of people in nearly half of all provinces during that year. The implications of the drought reflect the critical importance of implementing not just short-term humanitarian relief, but also longer-term recovery and resilience measures, and triggered a call from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) for larger donor contributions to aid affected populations through 2012.

Financing

A key indicator of the degree to which the international military intervention in Afghanistan has impacted the country can be seen in the value of aid flowing into the country, which has risen from under \$1 billion (USD) in 2001 to more than \$6 billion in 2010⁸. There has also been a concurrent rise in requested humanitarian funding from \$271 million in 2002⁹ to \$605 million in 2010¹⁰. Despite this, total official humanitarian aid itself remained relatively constant over the ten-year period (including a year-on-year decline since 2008). Total aid to the country in 2010-11 was about \$15.7 billion, about the size of Afghanistan's GDP¹¹.

In terms of the distribution of funding to implementing agencies in Afghanistan, the cluster system plays a vital role as a conduit for donors, with the Food Security and Agriculture Cluster (FSAC) playing a particularly important role in the event of a specific disaster event. The cluster system does not provide funding directly to members, but through the Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP) –

⁸ Global Humanitarian Assistance (based on OECD DAC data), Afghanistan Country Profile webpage, <http://www.globalhumanitarianassistance.org/countryprofile/afghanistan>

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¹¹ Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Ministry of Finance and The World Bank, "Transition in Afghanistan: Looking Beyond 2014"

based on needs analysis, context and priorities outlined in the Consolidated Humanitarian Action Plan (CHAP) – priorities are conveyed from organisations working on the ground directly to donors. Funding proposals are put forward by communities, often through Community Development Councils (CDC) formed through the National Solidarity Programme (NSP) to encourage local governance and decision-making. As of October 2012, the CAP funding requested (in total USD \$448 million) was only 48% met.¹² As noted below, there are also additional new funding mechanisms providing support to Afghan civil society actors and NGOs.

Current debates in humanitarian action in Afghanistan

There are a range of problems associated with humanitarian relief common to fragile and conflict-affected environments, and Afghanistan in this regard is no exception. Chief amongst these are the risks inherent in working in the midst of conflict, including physical security and the politicisation of aid and aid organisations. Retaining impartiality, in both appearance and substance, is crucial to ensuring continued access to vulnerable populations, but is increasingly difficult to achieve within a rapidly changing humanitarian context.

The effects of parallel aid and development efforts implemented by military actors in the zones of conflict mean that organisations not associated with the military need to establish and maintain their independence more overtly than ever. Such organisations must take care that their public image does not become connected with the presence of intervening states, whether this presence is military, civilian, or a mixture of both, as in the case of the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs).

The withdrawal of international military forces by the end of 2014 will also cause major disruptions to humanitarian aid, most directly through the expected reduction in funding and international attention. While no-one knows for certain what donors will continue to contribute, the pool of funding for humanitarian and development projects will diminish, placing additional strains on implementing NGOs and therefore putting vulnerable populations at risk.

The expectation that 2014 will see a decrease in funding alongside the withdrawal of foreign troops was not universally seen as a threat, with a minority of organisations engaged in humanitarian work regarding this process as a potential opportunity. The head of one organisation suggested that as the number of national actors working in the sector becomes unsustainable, and a slimming-down process needs to occur, the groups that remain will be the most motivated and efficient in their core activities.

¹² OCHA, Humanitarian Bulletin Afghanistan, Issue 09, October 2012; <http://afg.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/default/files/MHB%20October%202012.pdf>

NGOs and Civil Society in Afghanistan

Afghanistan has a history of vibrant civil society activity, even during some of the most difficult periods of political and social upheaval, and NGOs and other civil society organisations (CSOs) play an important role in Afghan society from the community level through to national policy making. Recent years have seen a proliferation of actors, and an estimate by PTRO suggests that more than 3000 local organizations are engaged in various forms of development action, with 190 national NGOs registered with the Afghanistan NGO Coordinating Bureau (ANCB).¹³

Within these headline figures there is great diversity in the size and capacity of individual organisations. The figure cited above includes small local organisations established by the NSP since 2003, primarily CDCs contracted to the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) to 'develop the ability of communities to identify, plan and monitor their own development projects.'¹⁴ There are also larger Afghan NGOs, operating across one or more provinces, as well as a small number of large, prominent national NGOs based out of Kabul and with a range of programming and policy interests. This group are seen by others as dominating the policy space for Afghan civil society actors, to the detriment of smaller organisations working at the local or regional level.

There is also huge diversity in the areas of focus and range of activities undertaken by Afghan agencies. The work of individual organisations often spans social and economic development, human rights, and peace building, as well as an interest in humanitarian and relief activities, whether proactively or in response to specific events.

Given the wide scope in the nature, focus and capacities of various civil society actors in Afghanistan, it is challenging to identify the boundaries of action relevant to a discussion of humanitarian networks. But within the huge changes that have affected civil society actors in the country since 2001, a number of features can be identified, which underline the challenges and potential future direction of national actors working on humanitarian issues.

First among the trends affecting Afghan NGOs and other civil society actors is the proliferation of agencies linked to the huge increase in funding available from international donors since 2002. These new funding opportunities for CSOs have been from multiple sources, but have often been lacking in overall coordination or coherence. The nature of funding has also ranged from longer-term capacity building down to small-scale, quick-impact project funding for CSOs, from the international military funding and PRTs.

¹³ PTRO, Tawanmandi CSOs mapping exercise, January 2012; <http://www.tawanmandi.org.af/english/images/files/Tawanmandi-Mapping-Report.pdf>

¹⁴ GIRoA MRRD, National Solidarity Programme website; <http://www.nspafghanistan.org>

This situation has encouraged the formation of many NGOs at the district, provincial and national levels seeking to capitalise on this newly available funding. Perceived as being rewarded for their ability to draft proposals and to fulfil donor reporting criteria, as opposed to their ability to deliver programmes, many of these organisations are seen as essentially profit-making vehicles run for the benefit of their founders, rather than for the communities they claim to serve and represent. Compounding this perception has been the lack of rigorous procurement procedures or sufficient monitoring and evaluation. Many of the organisations consulted for this study articulated this trend as seeing the sector becoming increasingly donor-driven, with funding led by foreign-administered Requests for Proposals (RfP), instead of calculated needs assessments from truly representative civil society groups.

Traditional CSOs, such as religious *shuras* have been, for the most part, largely ignored by foreign donors, and many recognise that this funding framework has led to the creation of distance between CSOs/NGOs and their constituent communities. With the notable exception of CDCs under Afghanistan's NSP, it is clear that the CSOs which have benefitted most since 2002 have not necessarily been the CSOs formed or elected by the Afghan population, but have been those with the best western understanding, or those with relations to powerful political actors.

These dynamics, particularly resulting from the rush to capitalise on available international funding, have helped to politicise the activities of CSOs, something well understood by most Afghan organisations. This has been compounded by the wider challenges to neutrality and impartiality in Afghanistan, with a blurring of the lines between impartial humanitarian action and **politically motivated** efforts to advance the interests of international forces and the Afghan government. This issue has perhaps been exemplified by the military led PRTs, seen by supporters as an innovative instrument for furthering the goal of stabilisation, but strongly objected to by many aid actors.¹⁵

The ability of national actors to influence these trends may be limited, but they have not been immune from the negatives effects on their perceived independence. National NGOs still have greater access to areas of humanitarian need, particularly in the more remote areas of the country, hence the reliance on local implementing partners by UN agencies and international NGOs. However, the attitude of the Taliban and other insurgent groups towards aid organisations is ambiguous and highly dependent on locality and individual commanders. Recent research suggests

¹⁵ Jackson, A. and S. Haysom (2013), 'The search for common ground: civil-military relations in Afghanistan, 2002-13' HPG Working Paper, available at: <http://www.odi.org.uk/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/8355.pdf>

that in some areas aid organisations are seen as cooperating with the government and as such are legitimate targets for insurgent violence. Accusations of spying are commonplace.¹⁶

Despite this apparently bleak picture, there is a cautious optimism among some sections of Afghan civil society. One common view is that civil society groups in Afghanistan are undergoing a period of transition, slowly becoming better organised and more competent. This is particularly noted with advocacy activities, which have had a marked success in recent years, including advocacy pressure towards the make-up of commissioners for the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), advocacy around women's shelters, and the mobilisation of a CSO delegation for attendance at the Bonn Conference in late 2011.

At the same time, although not primarily focused on disaster preparedness and risk reduction, the activities of CDCs under the NSP may also provide the possibility of more needs based response, given that local communities can prioritise projects that meet their own needs. As a result, if communities deem them important enough, development projects that meet particular risk reduction and preparedness goals can be implemented. In this way, local and national NGOs are increasingly supporting the creation of disaster management structures at the local level, without having to implement them directly or build the links necessary to provide adequate technical and practical support to local community groups.

In relation to international funding flows (which continue to be primarily through the clusters), there are also some signs that more coherent and sustainable models are developing with the broader objective of supporting Afghan civil society. Some of these frameworks display some of the characteristics of networks, without having been formally established as such. The Tawanmandi programme for example has been established by the governments of the UK, Sweden, Denmark and Norway to support projects focusing on access to justice, anti-corruption, peace building and conflict resolution, media, and human rights. While many of these sectors fall outside the traditional definition of humanitarian action, many of the 26 partners are also engaged in humanitarian responses, and these are indirectly supported through the Tawanmandi initiative.

Similarly the Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society (IPACS) is a USAID-funded platform to develop Afghan civil society through legislative strengthening, organisational development, and community and policy engagement. IPACS has 19 key CSO partners but provides support to over 300 individual CSOs across the country with operations in 32 of the 34 provinces of Afghanistan, many of which also undertake humanitarian activities.

¹⁶ ODI HPG Working Paper, Ashley Jackson and Antonio Giustozzi, Talking to the other side: Humanitarian Engagement with the Taliban in Afghanistan, December 2012, <http://www.odi.org.uk/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/7968.pdf>

Overall, decades of conflict in Afghanistan, and in particular the conflict of the previous ten years, have inevitably seriously tested the resilience and capacities of the range of civil society actors in the country, not least those NGOs providing relief and assistance. The huge influx of resources which has accompanied the international presence in the country has undoubtedly led to an increase of activities across a range of sectors, and to the growth and proliferation of actors across the country. Although this increase in resources has led to an increase in capacities and activities, it has not always done so in a coherent needs based fashion, and Afghan actors have not been immune from the politicisation of aid actors in the country. Despite this, those consulted as part of this research identified specific examples and improvements, and a general trend toward greater consolidation and coherence among those actors genuinely committed to addressing the wide range of challenges facing the Afghan population. An important element of this process will be the way in which national actors continue to relate to national coordination structures, which will briefly be looked at in turn.

Humanitarian Coordination Structures

Responses to emergency situations overlap considerably with longer-term development efforts, and even where clear attempts to demarcate the boundaries of each have been made, individual organisations often take part in numerous activities spanning humanitarian relief and development.

The structures designed to respond to disasters, encourage preparedness and to reduce risk are complex in their internal arrangements and external relationships. They represent attempts to coordinate all relevant actors, from UN agencies, national and local government, INGOs, and both national and regional Afghan NGOs.

National Government Structures

Overall responsibility for disaster response, preparedness and management within Afghanistan lies with the Afghan National Disaster Management Authority (ANDMA), headed in the event of an emergency by the National Disaster Management Commission (NDMC), a body comprising government ministers representing all relevant departments, including Defence, Interior, Water & Power, Agriculture and Animal Husbandry, Health, Rural Rehabilitation and Development, together with the Prime Minister. The NDMC convenes its meetings in the event of disasters on the instruction of the Office of Disaster Preparedness (ODP), a permanent body, in accordance with Afghanistan's disaster response law.¹⁷ It is also, however, ultimately responsible for disaster preparedness, prevention, mitigation, management and recovery.

¹⁷ The Law on disaster response, management and preparedness in the Islamic State of Afghanistan; http://www.andma.gov.af/Contents/295/Documents/228/Afghanistan_DM_Law_%20Englsih_Version.pdf

These national government decision-making structures are designed through legislation to be replicated at provincial and even district levels, temporarily and permanently, on the basis of need. This is crucial in providing appropriate and timely support in the event of emergencies, and in ensuring that disaster planning and risk reduction activities are carried out with the specific regional, provincial and community priorities as their focus. While in practise it appears that this does not happen to the extent that it should, the structure providing local-level decision making is one that should be nurtured and improved, and the networks involving local, national and international NGOs could provide crucial support in this regard.

DRR strategies, although not as mature as emergency response plans, have been drafted as part of Afghanistan's National Development Strategy (ANDS), through its strategic objective of social protection. ANDS notes how vulnerability to conflict and natural disasters correlates with poverty and commits the government to building more efficient disaster preparedness and response mechanisms, particularly under agriculture and rural development, although it does not explicitly invoke cooperation with either international actors or Afghan NGOs.¹⁸ Disaster Management structures in the government also form an integral part of the cluster system.

ANDMA has also utilised regional networks of expertise in the development of the National Disaster Management Plan, consulting SEEDS India (an Indian NGO – and a member of ADRRN – specialising in disaster risk reduction and resilience) to draw on disaster management planning experience in South Asia, and drawing up a comprehensive institutional framework and strategy for disaster risk management with technical assistance from the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

In addition to these disaster response and risk reduction structures, the National Solidarity Programme (NSP) was established in 2003 by the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) to promote the ownership and management of development projects by local communities. To achieve this, the NSP has established Community Development Councils (CDC) as the main community institutions for local governance and social-economic development decisions. These bodies are responsible for setting community priorities in terms of development objectives, including plans for disaster response and resilience. MRRD now disburses upwards of \$600 million through over 22,000 CDCs every year.¹⁹

To enable the setting up and continued activity of CDCs, MRRD works with 29 facilitating partners who educate communities on NSP processes, facilitate elections to CDCs and provide technical assistance to council members. All but one of the facilitating partners are international development

¹⁸ Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, "Afghanistan National Development Strategy", http://www.undp.org.af/publications/KeyDocuments/ANDS_Full_Eng.pdf

¹⁹ MRRD NSP, NSP milestones webpage, <http://www.nspafghanistan.org/default.aspx?sel=13>

groups, mostly NGOs but including UN Habitat. The one exception is the Sanayee Development Organisation (SDO), an Afghan national organisation working on the NSP in Kabul.

While the NSP is not a formal network, and there are no requirements for CDCs to maintain links between each other, there are examples of neighbouring communities meeting between themselves to discuss common development goals, share best practice and review ongoing projects. All facilitating partners are members of ACBAR and so maintain more substantial links to each other than simply through common facilitation work on the NSP.

International Coordination Structures

As in other contexts, the cluster system in Afghanistan is the primary conduit for much humanitarian assistance, and provides a forum for coordination and information exchange between UN and other actors, primarily government actors and international NGOs, and primarily operating at the national level in Kabul. The Food Security and Agriculture Cluster (FSAC) plays a particularly important role in the event of a specific disaster event. The main donors for FSAC in Afghanistan are ECHO and a number of national government departments, and FSAC meetings provide a forum for aid agencies, Afghan government ministries and UN representatives to convey their priorities directly to the donors.

A 2010 review of the cluster system by the NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project noted that the process of rolling out the system regionally was ongoing, and they were yet to have a countrywide impact due to limited awareness and capacity at the regional level, limiting the relevance of the cluster in response to sudden onset emergencies.²⁰ Although an ongoing challenge, efforts have been made to address this issue through mechanisms such as humanitarian regional teams and technical working groups at the regional level, and by engaging actors regionally. The FSAC for example now comprises representatives of ANDMA at both national and regional levels.

²⁰ Geirsdottir, L. (2010) 'Reflections from the Experience of the Humanitarian Reform Officer, NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project Afghanistan' available at: <http://r4d.dfid.gov.uk/Output/185393/Default.aspx>

The same report also noted a surprisingly high level of engagement from national NGOs within the clusters, although characterised this as ‘attendance and not participation’. The dominance of the cluster system by international actors was also noted in the research for this study. In seeking to create stronger links between the UN system and NGOs (national and international), the Afghan Humanitarian Forum (AHF) chaired by ACBAR and OCHA is an important additional structure feeding into the HCT. The AHF focuses specifically on the coordination of NGO activities, and advocacy on issues affecting the work of NGOs, and the ‘promotion of high ethical and professional standards amongst the NGO community’.²¹

Partnerships and Collaboration

Although the research for this study is concerned with formal inter-organisational networks, primarily those outlined and discussed below, a wide range of collaborative relationships are in evidence in Afghanistan, particularly linking international actors with national or local level NGOs. These partnerships typically involve international NGOs who broker longer-term agreements with Afghan CSOs, but have also taken the form of both short- and long-term initiatives from donors or with individual countries’ diplomatic missions. There are a number of reasons that partnerships with local CSOs are considered advantageous to both parties, not least the access afforded to indigenous groups that simply cannot be attained by international organisations.

International organisations can rightly claim to be directing their considerable financial support towards groups acting for communities at the lowest level, and CSOs benefit from training, knowledge transfer and the chance of a voice in international debates, as well as the institutional security offered by long-term funding. However, these partnerships appear to take a variety of forms and generate differing levels of credibility, spanning models based on subcontracting to more equal voluntary collaborations.

The national network of CDCs, active under Afghanistan’s NSP, are often viewed poorly in terms of being an active or legitimate form of civil society. While traditional *shuras* are recognised as legitimate actors in civil society, individual elders and religious leaders who have in the past monopolised the dispersal of resources in their communities are viewed with scepticism. There is also some debate over the future of CDCs, and whether they will become an official government sub-body or whether they will become fully autonomous CSOs. Because of this view, it is difficult to see them as legitimately representative of Afghan CSOs, but their activities, particularly in disaster response and risk reduction, deserve recognition and support.

²¹ See: <http://afg.humanitarianresponse.info/Coordination/National>

Local groups, or groups with local access, operate as implementing partners of members of the cluster system, although their relationship with UN agencies cannot be seen as an equal partnership, as they have no formal role in shaping the direction or operation of the coordinating structure in which they play a vital role. They are essentially sub-contractors, gaining from funds and a relationship with UN bodies, and hence from institutional donors.

Other collaborations between national and international actors demonstrate a greater level of equity and potential sustainability. Oxfam, for instance, have both implementing and strategic partners within their activities and the strategic partners are often offered some core funding, usually over a 12-month period.²² The aim of strategic partnerships is to promote 'joined up' working between CSOs and INGOs, and in addition to Oxfam, other groups such as Norwegian Church Aid (NCA), Christian Aid (CA), Asia Foundation (AF) and the Aga Khan Foundation all use local partners with agreements for extended periods of time. Afghanistan-based partners could be organisations with national coverage based in Kabul, or could be more local, with the ability to work in locations that international organisations cannot safely access.

A feature of such relationships is a desire to build the capacity of individual national organisations over and beyond a specific project, in particular by creating collaborations that go beyond traditional bilateral implementation agreements. In this sense, some INGOs are beginning to operate their own 'networks' of implementing partners across the country or across certain regions, where the local partners coordinate the delivery of humanitarian aid to the relevant areas.

Despite the success of many partnerships, it appears that a gap remains - in both abilities and procedures - between indigenous NGOs and INGOs operating in the country, and coordination and advocacy are often dominated by INGOs. Local partners are dynamic, but are sometimes seen as suffering from a lack of internal capacity and a deficiency of innovative ideas. Individuals that have set up organisations and other senior staff seem to be very dynamic, but this is not an institutionalised characteristic.

Related to this is a concern that INGOs and donors exhibit a paternalistic approach, encouraging dependency between local organisations and their INGO backers, and not allowing them the space to develop as fully autonomous organisations, capable of sustaining aid to their own communities. In reality, most national NGOs rely on several support strategies which could include partnerships with INGOs, direct funding for specific projects from UN and international government funding pools, and local (district or provincial) support. The speed at which the funding environment could change is

not lost on organisations, and new opportunities to promote sustainability are constantly being sought.

National NGO Networks

Given the context outlined above, in particular the wide-spread humanitarian need and the large international presence, it is unsurprising that there are a number of national networks formalising the ties between agencies across Afghanistan. There is also a strong hypothetical argument for why national NGO networks, focused fully or in part on humanitarian issues, could have a positive influence on humanitarian response in the country. In the expanding yet fractured context in which Afghan NGOs find themselves operating, creating stronger ties between organisations could provide a clear opportunity to build trust and reinforce the credibility of those organisations focused on providing impartial assistance. The creation of such communities would in turn provide opportunities for greater knowledge sharing, learning common lessons, and the efficient mobilisation of resources. Furthermore, creating a community of similar actors working on humanitarian response issues provides the opportunity to claim greater ownership over the direction of policy in the country and to advocate for change among the broad range of actors present in the country.

This research did not seek to map the full extent of networks in the country, but rather to identify relevant examples as perceived by those operating in Afghanistan, focusing on explicit inter-organisational networks as opposed to informal networking activities between individuals and organisations. A table outlining the purpose, structure and functions of the networks studied can be found in the appendix. The limited nature of this study does not allow for a full evaluation of the functions of various networks active in Afghanistan; indeed, this is not its intention. Instead, this section presents the networks included in the research and their focus areas and aims. This is followed by a description of the forms and functions displayed by these networks and the challenges they face.

Importantly, and perhaps as a consequence of the blurring of lines between humanitarian and development activities in the country, there were no fully indigenous networks whose thematic focus was solely on humanitarian action or emergency relief. Instead, the majority of NGO networks in Afghanistan centre on support for wider social and political development goals, which often encompass humanitarian, relief and/or DRR activities. Of the networks (and other structures) which are exclusively focused on humanitarian action, all were formed with the involvement of intergovernmental agencies, INGOs or Afghan government initiatives. The most relevant networks identified as part of this research, and which are examined in more detail are:

ACBAR: The Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief was founded in 1988 in response to calls from Afghan and international humanitarian organisations for increased coordination in humanitarian and development activities within Afghanistan and with Afghan refugees in Pakistan. It is now perhaps the largest and best known of the national level networks in Afghanistan. Originally based in Peshawar, ACBAR has since grown to provide a coordination mechanism for all NGOs, the Afghan government, the UN, and bilateral donors working in the country.

ANCB: The Afghan NGOs Coordination Bureau is a network of NGOs founded in 1991, which aims to coordinate the activities of Afghan NGOs, UN agencies, donors and international organisations, although its formal membership is limited to Afghan NGOs only. In addition it aims to provide capacity-building services to its members, and is linked to international NGO networks including the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA).

ACSFo: The Afghan Civil Society Forum was established as a partnership between Afghan civil society actors and the peace research institute Swisspeace, as an outcome of the first Afghan Civil Society Conference at Bad Honnef, Germany in 2001. It aims to build Afghan civil society through advocacy, capacity-building and coordination. Its membership comprises civil society organisations and individuals, and has more than 300 partners for capacity-building, civic education, advocacy, research and media.

AWN: The Afghan Women's Network is one of the most influential civil society networks in the country, and links members focussed on women's issues in the country. Founded in 1995 following the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, it initially focused on the plight of female Afghan refugees in Pakistan. It is now the largest women's rights organisation in Afghanistan, with around 100 member organisations and over 5,000 individual members.

CoAR: Established in 2008, the CoAR network takes its name from one of its three founding members, Coordination of Afghan Relief, and was formed to formalise their cooperation and increase the efficiency of their activities. The CoAR network is a member of ACBAR, ANCB and AWN.

Even though organisations working at district and community level are flourishing and increasingly capable, it is striking that all of these networks operate out of Kabul, with very few distinct regional networks of NGOs that represent sub-national areas of Afghanistan. These national networks instead establish provincial offices built on regional cooperation.

The exception to this is the Southern and Western Afghanistan and Balochistan Association for Coordination (SWABAC), a coordination network based in Afghanistan's southern provinces.

Network Forms

Network form concerns the particular structures, procedures and norms that underpin the way a network functions, and in particular shape the membership and governance of the network, and the relationship between the network members and any central coordinating entity. It is difficult to generalise about the form of networks in Afghanistan, ranging in size as they do from established networks with hundreds of members to smaller, emerging entities with just a few agencies involved. It's also important to note that many of the networks engaging with humanitarian and relief issues in the country are not primarily humanitarian networks, as in the case of AWN or ACSFo.

ACBAR operates a formal membership scheme, with member organisations paying an annual subscription fee dependent on their size. This is supplemented by grant funding for specific humanitarian projects from donors including ECHO. The network also raises revenue by listing jobs and requests for proposals on behalf of UN agencies, government departments, NGOs and commercial organisations. ACBAR currently has 115 members, of which approximately half are national NGOs or CSOs. Members must demonstrate their legal status and operational capacity in addition to committing to uphold the Code of Conduct for NGOs that ACBAR has developed. Governance is overseen by a Steering Committee of member representatives, and members are eligible to attend a bi-annual general assembly meeting. Despite engaging across the range of humanitarian actors present in the country, formal membership is open only to NGOs, whether national or international. The headquarters of ACBAR are located in Kabul, with regional sub-offices in Mazar-e Sharif, Herat, and Jalalabad. This model is replicated by many other networks – with headquarters in Kabul and a number of regional sub-offices. SWABAC, based in Afghanistan's southern provinces, was the only exception to this noted in the research.

The basic membership model employed by ACBAR is one that can be seen in other networks. ANCB, with almost 200 members, also seeks to bring together Afghan NGOs, UN agencies, donors and international organisations, yet chooses to limit its formal membership, in this case to Afghan NGOs only. Member meetings are convened monthly to address specific topics, such as health, education or sanitation, and the General Assembly meets every quarter to vote on new membership applications that have been submitted and approved by the Board of Directors. The Board comprises 11 representatives of existing member organisations that have been associated with the ANCB for at

least the previous two years. Membership fees provide the bulk of network income, but financial support is also made available in the form of funding for small-scale individual projects.

For other networks with a broader focus and aims, this wider scope is reflected in their structure, governance and membership. The range of actors engaged with ACSFo comprises civil society organisations and individuals, including 80 member organisations, 50 individual members and 320 'partner' organisations. Its constituency spans capacity-building, civic education, advocacy, research and media. In a similar structure to ACBAR, ACSFo is overseen by a Board of Directors and regular meetings or its General Assembly, and has a central office and programme unit in Kabul with seven further provincial offices.

Unlike ACBAR, ACSFo is not reliant on membership fees, instead raising resources through project funding from international NGOs, UN agencies and government donor organisations (including Oxfam Novib, UNDP and GTZ). ACSFo also receives substantial support from the USAID-funded IPACS programme, covering all of their activities, including project implementation in capacity-building and research, in addition to their coordination between groups and other network activities. Perhaps as a consequence of this, the ACSFo secretariat appears to be relatively autonomous from its members, implementing a range of policy, research programmes on the membership.

AWN has grown to be one of the most influential civil society networks in the country, and links members focussed on women's issues in the form of advocacy and capacity-building. Founded in 1995, it is now the largest women's rights organisation in Afghanistan, with 88 member organisations and over 5,000 individual members. It raises revenue both from membership fees and fees from service provision. The extensive involvement of individual members, from politicians to academics and leaders of women's groups, sets AWN apart from other national networks, and allows different groupings to be established more or less organically around particular events or issues. AWN's high-profile involvement at the Bonn conference in 2011 allowed a number of civil society actors and female politicians to substantively engage with structures of international funding and support. Through AWN's comprehensive connections with women in political and civil society, even in more isolated rural areas, the network is seen as inclusive, representative, and responsive to its members' concerns.

Apart from the divide between those networks focusing on humanitarian issues and those with a broader scope, a difference can also be seen in the CoAR networks membership and structure in comparison to older networks. Set up in part as a reaction to the size and perceived shortcomings of the more established national networks – and in particular their often-perceived dominance by international NGOs, which has increased over the last decade – the CoAR network currently brings

together five organisations working on different thematic areas (including education, sustainable livelihoods and media) but bound by common goals. The CoAR network works primarily on projects in line with the Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS), helping their members to build their capacity for independent fundraising, and to encourage transparency and accountability. Smaller, and with a relatively weak administrative centre, the network is being built on the links between members, rather than a secretariat or other organising entity.

Network Functions

This study draws on a number of existing models helpful when thinking about networks, and in particular a modified version of the NFA. This presents an immediate challenge, given that few if any fit easily into narrow definitions according to their function and form. Furthermore, the almost ubiquitous focus on coordination from all networks – although important – perhaps masks the variety of functions and activities they undertake. This section looks broadly at the activities undertaken by networks in Afghanistan, and the functions they aim to fulfil, before reflecting on how these reflect the established categories in the NFA.

Network activity in the humanitarian sphere was more limited and less endogenous than network activity for organisations active in other areas – such as human rights or peace-building – but nonetheless networks do exist and encompass intergovernmental agencies, government departments, INGOs, national NGOs, and local CSOs. The wide range of actors included, in itself, can be counted as a success.

All the national NGO networks aim to provide some form of coordination function, referring both to efforts to promote more coordinated and rational delivery of assistance, and to ensure joined up policy and advocacy positions among members. While the larger networks support service delivery through coordination meetings, they generally play less of a role in the coordination of interventions themselves. This role in the humanitarian sphere appears to be left to the cluster system, of which many individual NGOs are also a part.²³

ACBAR, for example, currently performs multiple functions, including information sharing within the humanitarian and development community, facilitation of coordination between members, representing members' policy positions, and enhancing the image of NGOs nationally (to beneficiaries) and internationally (to donors). As well as acting to facilitate member activities, the ACBAR secretariat has significant agency, and co-chairs the Afghan Humanitarian Forum (AHF)

²³ ACBAR does appear to have played a more active role in the coordination of implementation prior to the introduction of the cluster system to Afghanistan in 2009, but has been supplanted by the larger, more high-profile international coordination mechanism. ACBAR's coordination of development activities not included within the remit of the cluster system has remained vital, forming a link between implementing organisations and government that is not replicated by other structures.

together with the head of OCHA. This forum focuses on the coordination of NGO activities at the national and regional levels, advocacy on NGO issues, representation of the NGO community to other humanitarian stakeholders, and gives member organisations direct access to UN humanitarian bodies and donors. Taken together, these activities contribute to ACBAR's role in coordinating the action of its members and the wider aid community in Afghanistan, seen by many as one of the key successes of networks operating in the country.

This range of activities can be seen being replicated in whole or in part by other networks operating in the country. In general, this coordination role is based on a number of functions and activities, including knowledge management and information sharing, and facilitating dialogue between members and the wider aid community. Where successful, it appears to be based on a strong sense of community between members, and the ability to convene a broad range of actors to address issues of concern to network members.

Knowledge Management

The knowledge management function clearly plays a central role in creating more coherent and coordinated relationships between network members and the wider aid community. This takes place primarily through the networks' role in identifying, filtering and sharing relevant information through a variety of channels, not least their websites, newsletters and other publications. ACBAR makes extensive use of its web space to advertise jobs (a commercial service that advertisers pay to use) and to publicise Requests for Proposals (RfP) and tendering opportunities from donors, government and commercial organisations. The network also publishes a range of guides to the NGO sector and various policy issues in Afghanistan, as well as regular bulletins of network activities and other relevant information.

ACSFo publishes a monthly edition of Jamea-e-Madani (a civil society magazine) to reflect the views, analyses and various dimensions of civil society. The magazine is distributed throughout the country, reaching an estimated 2 million people in total. Special editions have concentrated on the constitutional and electoral processes.

All of the national networks have websites outlining their main objectives and current activities, and although other networks make less use of their internet presence for distinct knowledge management functions, Awn does have a number of press releases, research publications and meeting minutes (in the three relevant languages) available for download by interested parties. ANCB, ACBAR, Awn and ACSFo all have publically available member lists, with information on their member organisations' locations and fields of activity.

Advocacy

Advocacy and the amplification and dissemination of policy messages on behalf of members were seen by many respondents as being a key area of successful growth in recent years. AWN in particular has had a number of successes in gaining wider publicity for women's issues, as well as promoting policy dialogue and development at the highest levels of government. The group of civil society activists that they took to Germany to participate in the Bonn conference in 2011 was particularly high profile, and placed the network and the issues faced by Afghan Women, firmly in the media's attention. Among the range of issues that AWN conducts advocacy in relation to are specifically humanitarian issues such as the impact of the conflict on women.

ACBAR's advocacy aims to voice the concerns of its members and represent their interests towards both government and the public – a function that some member organisations claim they could be performing better.

The CoAR network includes a dedicated media group, Gorbat Radio and TV (GRTV), founded specifically by CoAR with a mandate to inform and engage the public through radio, TV and internet-based productions. Its specific focus is disaster management and environmental concerns.

There is little clear difference in the methods that the national networks use to conduct advocacy, with all relying on members' concerns and energy to drive their advocacy efforts. Because of this, the networks all conduct advocacy campaigns that align with their members' primary objectives: AWN works on women's issues; ACBAR advances its members' concerns in regional and national humanitarian policy forums; and ACSFo conducts advocacy to promote civil society engagement in policy-making processes at both national and provincial levels. AWN also works to link its own national advocacy to international campaigns such as UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, emphasising women's role in the prevention and resolution of conflicts.

Mobilising resources for training and capacity development

A seemingly significant function performed by networks in Afghanistan for their members is mobilising resources to increase their capacity and effectiveness, primarily through the provision of training and capacity development. Topics for such efforts have included electoral education (AWN), anti-corruption (ANCB), project management (ACBAR), and organisational development (ACSFo). These sessions also represent an opportunity for members to share their experiences outside of formal coordination meetings, introduce new members to the networks, and widen their public profiles. A number of network members highlighted the possibility for networks to improve their ability to identify the strengths of members and subsequently link them with funding, and the pragmatic mobilisation of resources forms part of the ambitions of the CoAR network.

Both AWN and ACSFo have offered training workshops to members and partner CSOs, NGOs and civil servants in a number of areas including large-scale civic education around the process of forming the constitution, and on parliamentary and presidential elections. Both networks contain significant numbers of women's groups, and so both conduct training that focuses on women's participation and women's issues in general.

ACBAR have carried out a large number of training courses for humanitarian actors on project and team management, looking at project design, implementation and evaluation. They also offer courses that concentrate on training future trainers from humanitarian organisations. ANCB's training workshop on combating corruption has been run for male and female partners and explores the various methods that can counter corruption, in government, educational institutions, and the economic sphere. The course aims to give participants practical knowledge of individual and institutional approaches to combatting corruption.

Promoting quality and standards

In a related initiative, ACBAR has used its position to promote improvements in the quality of relief activities among its members. In 2005 the network's membership came together to develop an NGO Code of Conduct in response to accusations of misuse of funds. All members of ACBAR must sign up to the Code – which is now also a requirement for membership of other networks – committing organisations to transparency, accountability, good governance and non-discriminatory practices, as well as to building Afghan capacity. ACBAR's involvement in the development of the Code and its credibility amongst the NGO community reinforces the network's ability to present unified responses to issues affecting humanitarian and development efforts. In addition, the AHF reinforces ACBAR's role in promoting and maintaining ethical and professional standards amongst the NGO community.

According to many national NGOs, the widespread adoption of the Code of Conduct has introduced a level of transparency and professionalism that few would have reached without it. Despite the criticisms levelled at the network, ACBAR are seen as playing a key role in representing the NGO community to both government and the Afghan population.

Community building and Convening

The ability to build and sustain a community amongst network members, and from this to convene a more diverse group of actors, appears to be particularly important in fulfilling a coordination role, and for the success and sustainability of networks more generally. Given the contested environment in Afghanistan, with much discussion and division around humanitarian principles and the roles of different actors, this is particularly important. ACBAR, AWN and ANCB all hold formal members'

meetings at both national and regional levels. These meetings are crucial to building network communities, and allowing open and honest discussion between the entire range of national actors working on a specific issue.

In addition, ACBAR has a more formal role alongside OCHA within the AHF, and is seen as playing a vital role in convening NGO, UN and government actors. This was especially emphasised in Herat for the Western region, where the network was seen as particularly active in playing a coordinating role between NGOs and government. Respondents reported that government representatives not only attended these meetings but responded to requests, for example for changes to reporting formats or unrealistic application deadlines for resources. ACBAR's success lies in its national reputation and standing amongst the humanitarian and development communities in Afghanistan. Membership of ACBAR is seen as important for national and international member organisations, to ensure visibility, gain information, and coordinate effectively with government and other groups through the network's regular national and regional meetings.

In a setting such as Afghanistan, building the social capital needed to convene safe, trusted spaces for dialogue and consensus building is a challenging task. For most networks this means keeping formal membership limited to NGOs. In the case of ACBAR this includes both national and international NGOs and CSOs, while for ANCB this is limited to Afghan NGOs only. At the same time, these networks are also active and keen to engage with other actors in a variety of ways. This approach appears to allow the networks to build a community among their core constituency while simultaneously working to convene more heterogeneous groups. It is not without its challenges however, and for those networks that engage both national and international NGOs, the perceived dominance of international actors at the expense of indigenous organisations was a recurrent issue, and one that was noted to have increased in recent years.

Perhaps as a response to this, the approach taken by the CoAR network has been radically different. The CoAR network's membership, while not explicitly excluding international members, currently comprises only national groups, and expansion to include international groups is not a strategic objective. The network has instead focused on aligning activities between the five organisations, seeking to avoid duplication and working together where appropriate, including taking an integrated approach to fundraising, involving joint responses to donor offers, in what may become a more active resource mobilisation function. Although it is perhaps too early to judge the return on such an approach, the emergence of the CoAR network is itself significant.

Inter-network links

Looking beyond specific individual network functions to the wider environment in Afghanistan, a high level of integration between networks can be seen. Many of the network secretariats are participating members in other networks, as well as having strong informal links; AWN is a member of ACBAR, and the CoAR network is a member of ACBAR, ANCB, and AWN. ACBAR's status in the UN's cluster system readily demonstrates this crossover between networks and coordination structures of different forms and functions. While their membership of ACBAR did not guarantee them a say in the implementation of programmes or inclusion in meetings, it gave organisations valuable access to donor information and priorities.

In addition to the national networks, there are a number of international and regional networks that have active memberships within Afghanistan and provide vital links to expertise and regional solidarity through organisations operating in other countries. Examples of this type of network include the Human Rights Research & Advocacy Consortium (HRRAC), the International Social Watch Coalition, South Asian Association of Budget Accountability (SAABA) and the Asian Disaster Risk Reduction Network (ADRRN), with four member agencies in Afghanistan. ANCB are members of ICVA. Many of the larger and more established national NGOs are involved with these networks in addition to membership of the national NGO networks described above. These organisations described the benefits that the international networks offered, mostly in terms of the benefit of learning from other countries' experience and the potential offered by an international advocacy platform

Challenges

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the major challenges facing networks often coincided with the challenges facing member organisations themselves and Afghan civil society more generally. The most pressing was the poor security situation, often leading to reduced access to humanitarian space and uncertainty in planning. For networks already one step away from programming activities, this concern related to being further removed from hands-on assessment and information gathering, resulting in them becoming less accurate and relevant sources of information. While the ongoing (and potentially deteriorating) security situation is a concern for all actors on some level, there were an additional set of recurrent challenges facing the networks studied. These included:

- **The Kabul-centric nature of many networks.** With all the networks looked at as part of this study based in Kabul, there was a perception that they were too focused on national level issues and discussions. This was to the detriment of outlying provinces and remote districts, with voices from groups in the provinces not heard at the national

level. The only exception to this was SWABAC, operating in southern and western Afghanistan from a base in Kandahar, although this by definition limits their presence at the national level. Despite ACBAR's largely positive image and success in convening regular national and provincial meetings, there was a disconnect identified between its national and regional operations, with the latter seen as largely autonomous; and while they performed well for the region, some members thought that they could better link their provincial level structures with their national structure overall. The specific challenge faced was to ensure the development of operational structures so that local decision-making structures are strengthened, regional needs are met, and activation and de-activation processes for emergency relief are better developed and more widely understood.

- **The dominating influence of a small number of agencies.** A potential challenge for any network, the challenge of domination by a small number of agencies, was seen a real threat to the sustainability of networks in Afghanistan. The most obvious manifestation of this was the domination by international NGOs of those networks with both national and international members – meaning that the networks became a forum for the perpetuation of the internationally-dominated system, rather than a counterbalance to it. National NGO members of ACBAR, for instance, noted that the perceived domination of network meetings by international organisations was leading to a further lack of engagement by national groups, rendering national NGOs invisible and their opinions unheard – a problem that had been exasperated in recent years, with the increased international activity in the country.

The issue of dominance was not limited to the international/national divide, with the potential for larger, Kabul-based Afghan organisations to dominate national discussions also raised as an issue.

- **Maintaining ongoing participation.** Participation in general was also noted as a problem, as it was recognised that all members had to actively engage for a network to function at an optimal level. Instead, the impression was that some groups only attended meetings when they clearly saw that they could derive some benefit or believed that they would receive money. This failing can obviously be countered by increased activity in the network by local actors, but currently none of the critics seem sufficiently enthusiastic to rectify the situation.
- **Competition among member organisations.** Another challenge facing networks and stemming directly from the wider environment for NGOs was competition between organisations. This problem was manifested in the apparent reluctance of some national NGOs to share information on existing projects with each other, in case it led to further

competition for scarce funding opportunities. It can reasonably be anticipated that this problem will only become more significant in the short-term, with the withdrawal of international troops leading to an expected decrease in funding prospects.

- **Competition with clusters.** Aside from competition between members within networks, the dominance of the clusters in coordinating activities and as a conduit for resources also appears to challenge NGO networks, particularly given that so many aim to fulfil a coordination function themselves. As it is unlikely that UN agencies or the cluster system will disappear from Afghanistan in the short- or medium-term, the danger remains that the cluster system usurps any indigenous network capacity, not necessarily in terms of service delivery (as most service delivery and project implementation is done by Afghan groups or established international NGOs) but with respect to the wider range of functions performed by networks. This could leave indigenous network capacity, particularly in humanitarian relief, in a perilous position.

Finally, national NGO network members, particularly those of ACBAR, recognised the potential of networks but wanted the organisations to be more active in promoting the work of NGOs amongst beneficiary communities and to the wider public. In addition they wanted the network to do more to assess their members' areas of expertise in order to link them up with national and regional networks based on thematic focus and professional skills. This was also seen as important so that networks could be better prepared to match NGOs with potential projects, and perform a resource mobilisation function. One interviewee said wryly that if any network asked their member organisations which of them could go to the moon, all of them would be certain to answer 'yes'!

Initial Findings

There are a number of different network-type organisations active in Afghanistan, but few that fit easily into narrow definitions according to their function and form. The major national and international NGO networks within the country are intertwined: INGOs and NGOs, government ministries and UN agencies interact at national, regional and provincial levels through multiple platforms. National networks and their members appear to be working together in a number of ways, through partnerships, oversight, and joint membership of different networks. Organisations often have membership of multiple networks, including regional and international, UN-arranged and government-mandated mechanisms, as well as national NGO networks either partially or wholly aimed at supporting national NGOs.

Lack of coordination in some activities is a problem, and efforts have seen duplication and a lack of coordination with the relevant government bodies. In many provinces it is common for the government to have no knowledge of which CSO groups are active, or the nature of their activities. National networks provide a forum for regular coordination between NGOs/CSOs, government departments, and donors, but many groups were more enthusiastic about the role the cluster system played in both providing funds and giving NGOs the opportunity to relay their concerns directly to major funders.

The NGO and civil society environment in Afghanistan is enthusiastic and vibrant, but faces a huge array of challenges. First amongst these is the sheer volume of humanitarian disasters that the Afghan population and, as such, the aid community faces. Network action, particularly in the form of greater coordination, has proven to be invaluable in facing the immediate aftermath of disasters and ensuring that more help reaches those most needy more quickly.

Despite this success, the relative institutional immaturity of all parties within Afghanistan – including NGOs, UN systems, government departments and networks themselves – means that their capacity, and commensurate ability to deliver necessarily ambitious objectives is limited. Building the capabilities of these organisations, alongside state support – such as greater government coordination – would give them a greater chance of reaching their stated goals.

The relatively recent proliferation of Afghan NGOs also presents an opportunity for them to learn from other groups' experience, whether through established international networks such as ADRRN, or through the membership of national networks such as ACBAR or ANSO; a membership that is historically familiar with the multiple local contexts within the country.

Funding flows to CSOs in Afghanistan have tended to be short term and groups such as USAID and the PRTs have been criticised for providing project funding without adequate oversight. The result is a sector which is largely unsustainable and reliant upon short projects just to survive. National networks can help in this regard by linking organisations to new and existing funding opportunities, but it seems likely in the short-term that funding gaps will be addressed more through ambitious donor schemes, such as the Tawanmandi programme, than any effort supplied by NGO coordination bodies.

In the run-up to nationwide transition of security and governance responsibility, scheduled to be completed by the end of 2014, donor priorities and engagement are more uncertain than ever. Growing problems caused by security and lack of access will make fulfilling organisational mandates increasingly difficult, while at the same time continued squeezing of funding opportunities will make the future uncertain. While networks that rely on membership fees have a sustainable funding

model and will likely withstand the reduction in external funding (albeit with a reduced staff or geographical reach), organisations that rely on large contributions from one or two institutional donors are understandably concerned that funding will be reduced to an unsustainable level. Those networks that are able to diversify their sources of income or increase their efficiency will be the best prepared for the reduction in overall donations. Linked to these concerns is the fear of international public interest in Afghanistan falling away over the next two years and beyond, which will likely see further reductions through falling donations.

The benefits conferred on individual organisations through membership of the different networks range from extensive sharing of information, through funding opportunities and direct access to donors, to technical support and training. In contrast, many organisations, particularly away from the capital, felt that their networks could be more active in promoting them at national and international level, as well as helping project a better image, of their individual organisations and of the NGO sector as a whole. It is clear that despite the myriad challenges that Afghan NGO networks will face in the near future, member organisations have the capacity and resourcefulness to increase their utility, if they have the will to do so.

A final issue that fell outside the scope of this research, but may provide a fruitful avenue for further exploration, is the extent to which national culture and religion impact on the nature of networks and other forms of collaboration. The influx of resources into Afghanistan has undoubtedly shaped the development of NGOs and their networks. In some instances, such as in relation to traditional structures such as *shura*, this has weakened their role, but in other instances these new resources have reinforced the legitimacy and relevance of existing structures. Afghanistan's Islamic and essentially tribal culture undoubtedly remains an important factor influencing the country's political culture, and although many of the networks structures that exist appear to be based on primarily western ideas, exploring the influence of underlying cultural norms may prove to have important consequences for the form and function of networks in the country.

Appendix: Overview of Network Organisations operational in Afghanistan

Network	Purpose and goals	Membership	Structure	Core Functions
NGO networks				
Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR)	<p>ACBAR was founded in 1988 to coordinate cross-border and refugee humanitarian efforts between 40 NGOs.</p> <p>Now exists to serve and facilitate the work of its NGO members in order to address efficiently and effectively the humanitarian and development needs of Afghans.</p>	<p>Now comprises 114 national and international NGOs working in Afghanistan, on a variety of humanitarian, social, economic and rights issues.</p>	<p>Formal membership structure, with a steering committee made up of representatives of member organisations, which meets monthly.</p> <p>Members must adhere to the NGO Code of Conduct, and are eligible to take part in the bi-annual general assembly.</p>	<p>Originally set up to act as a joint representative to the UN system in Afghanistan, ACBAR now encompasses multiple roles, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information sharing within its membership. Facilitating coordination mechanisms. Representation of NGOs' position on policy and practice. Enhancing the image of NGOs in Afghanistan. Building capacity and mobilising civil society. NGO job listings. Open RfPs and funding opportunities. Legal advice to NGOs.
Southern and	<p>Formed as a parallel organisation</p>	<p>As of last year, SWABAC had 41</p>	<p>With its Head Office in Kandahar,</p>	<p>Coordination, advocacy and</p>

Western Afghanistan and Balochistan Association for Coordination (SWABAC)	to ACBAR, but originally limited to NGOs acting out of Quetta. ²⁴ Now acts to improve coordination within the assistance community in southern Afghanistan.	members. Membership is open to government-registered NGOs working in southern Afghanistan, who can be certified by five other NGOs.	SWABAC in the co-ordinating body for NGOs in the southern region of Afghanistan. It has a formal membership structure with a steering committee comprising member organisations.	capacity-building.
Afghan NGO Coordination Bureau (ANCB)	ANCB was founded in 1991 and aims to coordinate the activities of Afghan NGOs, UN agencies, donors and international organisations.	Almost 200 current members across the country, limited to Afghan NGOs.	Headquartered in Kabul with regional offices in Nangarhar and Wardak provinces. Convenes monthly member meetings on particular topics.	Offers information sharing, capacity-building and technical assistance to members, in the form of needs assessment, management, finance and report & proposal writing.
Coordination of Afghan Relief Network (CoAR)	The CoAR Network was founded in 2008 to formalise the relationship between several cooperating groups working on sustainable development.	Comprises five organisations (CoAR, STARS, ISDT, OSDR and Gorbat Radio TV) with different focuses, but all with involvement in building resilience and disaster risk reduction.	Formal structure, including an executive board and both executive and non-executive (non voting) member organisations.	The network has three core functions: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Avoiding functional duplication between organisations. 2. Coordination of activities and working together where appropriate.

²⁴ Christensen, Asger; "Aiding Afghanistan: The Background and Prospects for Reconstruction in a Fragmented Society", Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS), 1995.

				3. Taking an integrated approach to fundraising, including joint responses to donor offers
Afghan Women's Network (AWN)	AWN was founded in 1995 as a coordinating group for women's organisations within Afghanistan	Comprises around 103 NGO members and 5,000 individual members	Formal and disbursed network organisation, with the network secretariat based in Kabul, and a strong regional presence in Herat, Jalalabad and other provinces through its member organisations. Also has a presence in Peshawar, Pakistan, working with Afghan refugees.	The three areas of focus for the network are: Networking and coordination. Advocacy and lobbying towards national leaders on issues affecting women and girls. Capacity-building for all member groups, designed to enable women to take a full role in the rehabilitation of the country.
Afghan Civil Society Forum (ACSFo)	Established in 2001 following the Afghan Civil Society Conference in Germany, facilitated by Swisspeace, with the aim of facilitating the process of citizen-building and state-building through advocacy, capacity-building and coordination.	Around 450 members, including 80 members organisations, 50 individual members and 320 partners.	Overseen by a General Assembly and Board of Directors, ACSFo has a central office and programme unit in Kabul, and seven provincial offices that function as advocacy platforms and resource centres.	ACSFo's function is to promote civil society, raise awareness, undertake policy advocacy, and strengthen coordination amongst civil society actors.

Afghanistan NGO Safety Office (ASNO)	ANSO was formed in 2002 to collate and distribute information on the changing security situation throughout the country.	ANSO services are available to non-governmental, non-profit humanitarian organisations. Currently supports the operations of more than 250 organisations.	Informal, centralised information distribution network. Members receive information and occasionally contribute, but have no decision-making role in the organisation.	Security and safety information distribution, primarily for humanitarian workers within Afghanistan.
National Government networks				
National Solidarity Program (NSP)	The NSP was created by the MRRD in 2003, with the goal of creating a viable decision-making structure encompassing all local development activities throughout the country. The stated objective is to rebuild the social fabric and relationships at grassroots level following the ruinous effects of the last 30 years of conflict.	The NSP aims to establish CDCs in all areas of the country, through 29 facilitating partner organisations which include INGOs, UN agencies and national NGOs.	Established under the Afghan government MRRD, CDCs are directly elected local bodies that make decisions for the benefit of their communities over all aspects of development opportunities, including project priorities and allocation of funds. Facilitating partners provide guidance on the NSP process, help with local elections, provide technical assistance, and conduct monitoring activities.	To develop to the ability of all Afghan communities to identify, plan, manage and monitor their own development projects.